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ABSTRACT

In an effort to improve the quality of teaching at Oklahoma Junior College (OJC), the college's administration mandated peer coaching as part of a peer evaluation process. Peer coaching, a means of keeping valuable experience from being lost to the college due to death, retirement, or other separation, encourages instructors to learn about the art of teaching from and with their associates. The key in establishing a peer coaching program is the development and guarantee of non-threatening environments. At OJC, the following ground rules were established after extensive planning sessions with the faculty: (1) the administration is not to participate in any peer observations or in any feedback sessions; (2) the process must be non-evaluative and non-punitive and yet have the support of the administration; (3) the process is not intended to replace administrative or student evaluations; (4) the process is to develop according to each instructor's needs; (5) the administration is required to provide staff development sessions during inservices; (6) all peer encounters will be positive in nature and confidentiality will be preserved by all parties; and (7) the administration will require faculty members to turn in completed and approved peer observation forms three times a year stating that peer coaching has taken place. Because a peer coaching program cannot survive without a companion staff development program, the Minor-Preston model was developed, which defines the role of the faculty and the administration in relation to the staff development process, while outlining a combination of instructor evaluation methods and inservice opportunities. In addition, the complementary Minor-Preston peer coaching model was created, providing seven different observation techniques designed to match the individual styles and needs of instructors. (24 references) (JMC)

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Peer Coaching at the Junior College Level: Developing a Non-threatening Environment

PRESENTED TO:
National Conference on the Adult Learner
Columbia, South Carolina
May 26-29, 1991

by

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ABSTRACT

Title: Peer Coaching At The Junior College Level: Developing Non-traditional Environments.

Authors: James F. Minor, Ed.D., and Kenneth M. Preston, M.B.A.

Purpose: Presented to the National Conference on the Adult Learner, May 26-29, 1991, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

Major area of interest: Adult and Continuing Education; Teacher Training

In an effort to improve the quality of teaching at Oklahoma Junior College, (OJC), Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the administration of Oklahoma Junior College has mandated the development of a peer evaluation process. Peer coaching at OJC is defined as faculty observation by other faculty that meets one of the seven coaching conditions described in the section of the paper on observation variations. Peer coaching encourages instructors to learn about the art of teaching from and with their associates. It is a means of keeping valuable experience from being lost to the college due to death, retirement, or other separation.

One of the major problems in education is the isolation of teachers for much of their careers. Peer coaching can be an effective means of helping instructors connect with one another and to help keep their teaching styles fresh. It is an excellent way to either make use of a networking system or to start one.

Peer coaching should not achieve a place in the educational system whereby it becomes another level of paperwork with potential accountability. In an age when our social orders and ideas are overturned almost weekly any form of evaluation cannot help but be looked upon with some apprehension. Therefore, it is necessary to build non-threatening environments; however, one faculty member said once you get the administration involved someone is going to be held accountable. The literature indicates that a peer coaching program cannot survive without administrative support in the form of a companion staff-development program.

The peer coaching process at OJC has met with some hostility. Only after careful planning sessions with the faculty could the following ground rules be set:

1. The administration is not to participate in any peer observations or in any feedback sessions.
2. The process must be non-evaluative and non-punitive and yet have the support of the administration.
3. The process is not intended to replace administrative or student evaluations.
4. There are no tried and true rules for the process; it is to develop according to each instructor's needs.
5. The administration is required to provide staff development sessions during inservices.
6. All peer encounters will be positive in nature and confidentiality will be preserved by all parties.
7. The administration will require faculty members to turn in completed, approved, peer observation forms three times a year stating that peer coaching has taken place.

The key in establishing a peer-coaching program is the development and guarantee of non-threatening environments.

Peer Coaching at the Junior College Level: Developing Non-threatening Environments

Many of us fear bureaucratic type intervention because it can grow beyond our control. Automobile inspection is a typical example of this type of intervention. Initially only a few items on cars were checked, but in recent years the list has grown to include things voters could have never anticipated. Faculty members at Oklahoma Junior College know that improved teaching quality within the college is important. But is it any wonder that they view the inception of a peer-coaching program as a threat to academic freedom? The instructors have the opportunity to shape their own peer-coaching environment, yet many of them are reluctant to support the program. After all, we live in an age when political correctness is the order on many campuses. An informal survey indicated the instructors at the college feared pressure from their peers and the administration in the pursuit of their teaching duties. They seemed to be asking the question, "Is little brother watching?"

The purpose of this paper is to define peer coaching, to present the need for continuing staff-development programs and non-threatening environments, and to provide information on the peer-coaching model utilized by Oklahoma Junior College.

A Definition of Peer Coaching for the Purposes of Oklahoma Junior College

Peer coaching at Oklahoma Junior College (OJC), Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is defined as faculty observation by other faculty that meets one of the observation variations described in the section later in this paper. Peer coaching encourages instructors to learn about the art of teaching from and with their associates. It is a means of keeping valuable experience from being lost to the college due to death, retirement, or other separation. Baker and Shower (qtd in LeBlanc and Zide, 1987)

defined peer coaching as "the provision of on-site, personal, and technical assistance for teachers" (p. 4). At Oklahoma Junior College it is a program where any instructor has the opportunity to utilize the skills, insights, and methods of other instructors; a formalized program where teachers can offer or receive help when new or unusual situations present themselves.

Peer coaching was mandated at Oklahoma Junior College as a means of developing a peer "evaluation" process. It was mandated following an informal meeting with a staff member from the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education who indicated that peer evaluations could become an item of interest in future accreditation visits. Just as we all had the opportunity to have our cars inspected before it became law, instructors at Oklahoma Junior College are being encouraged to utilize a tool that has always been available to them while they still have the opportunity to influence how it will be used.

Peer coaching can be an effective means of helping teachers connect with one another and keep their teaching styles fresh. After all, once teachers finish their education, they generally spend much of their lives isolated from their peers. Manning (1988) said,

> One of the major problems that faces teachers is the loneliness of teaching. The fact that teachers have little contact with peers during the work day or the work week creates a problem for morale and a problem for growth. (p. 45)

The administration at Oklahoma Junior College already had concerns about adjunct faculty who were isolated in a very real sense. With the indication of the importance that the State Regents might soon place on a peer "evaluation" program, the faculty was called together for several planning sessions. LeBlanc and Zide (1988) said the "Two major areas which affect the implementation of peer coaching . . . for increased teacher effectiveness are: 1) conditions for teacher growth, and 2) administrative support" (p. 6). Keeping these two areas in mind, the fac-

ulty and the administration set the following ground rules for the program:

1. The administration is not to participate in any peer observations or in any feedback sessions.

2. The process must be non-evaluative and non-punitive and yet have the support of the administration.

3. The process is not intended to replace administrative or student evaluations.

4. There are no tried and true rules for the process; it is to develop according to each instructor's needs.

5. The administration is required to provide staff development sessions during inservices.

6. All peer encounters will be positive in nature and confidentiality will be preserved by all parties.

7. The administration will require faculty members to turn in completed, approved, peer observation forms three times a year stating that peer coaching has taken place.

An Overview

We like to believe we live in a benevolent environment; however, it is important to realize that not everyone lives or works in comfortable surroundings. And some people are not benevolent, and others have been treated poorly by non-benevolent or non-supportive people. Griffith (1973) indicated that much teacher reluctance to accept classroom visitations comes from unpleasant or unproductive experiences (p. 5).

Still, peer coaching is an excellent way to either make use of a network or to begin one. Peer coaching is not the goal of the exercise; better teaching and better support for instructors are the goals. And we must remember that peer coaching is not the instructors' profession, teaching is.

We live in an age where our social orders and ideas are overturned almost weekly. In an environment of political correctness, as reported in such publications ranging from The

Chronicle of Higher Education to the Reader's Digest, instructors on our college campuses have more reason to fear all types of evaluation than ever before. The addition of a new form of "evaluation" to a system already overburdened by paperwork accountability cannot help but be looked upon with some apprehension. Political correctness is playing havoc with the concept of academic freedom. Those who may be willing to jump on the bandwagon of change cannot be allowed to destroy those who choose to remain different. Now, more than ever, if peer coaching is to work as it is intended, it must be left to the teachers themselves to find their own value in it, free from all outside influences. Peer coaching cannot become a new level in the bureaucracy.

Accepting the Consequences of a Bomb

In an article on staff development, Helling (1988) has stated:

> To write, then, for an audience of professors and staff development practitioners about a specific method of helping to improve teaching seems not only presumptuous, but foolhardy. . .as professionals. . .[W]e are understandably reluctant to let others tell us what the job is or how it should be done. (p. 147)

Therefore, it is up to the instructors themselves to decide what they want from peer coaching. Maybe one teacher only wants to observe another instructor to see how a certain objective can be taught. Maybe another teacher wants someone to observe her class to see when she begins to lose her students' interest. It may also be that a pair or group of instructors decide simply to play the game to satisfy the administrative requirement with no real intention of learning or teaching anything to each other.

The central focus in the beginning of a peer-coaching program is to develop non-threatening environments. One of the biggest stumbling blocks is the issue of semantics. Knowing that

"words sometimes mean different things to different people" (Hayakawa, 1949, p. 19), non-threatening environments are sometimes difficult to cultivate. This point was emphasized when the subject of peer coaching was originally brought to the attention of the faculty at Oklahoma Junior College. The very words "peer coaching" were threatening to the instructors. It seemed that each one automatically associated the term with summative or punitive evaluation. Even though individuals may know and like each other very well, as in the case of the faculty at OJC, the idea of an intruder in the classroom may frighten or intimidate an individual instructor, the students, or both. Elson (1988), in his article on designing peer observation programs, said, "The presence of one or more observers in the classroom cannot help but influence all that occurs in the classroom on observation day" (p. 52). One instructor at Oklahoma Junior College observed that it was helpful to tell her students to expect visitors, and that the purpose was to improve the teaching quality at the school.

The majority of the time utilized in setting up the peer-coaching program at Oklahoma Junior College was spent defining terms, setting up ground rules, and wording the peer-coaching agreement. It was necessary to clear each written statement associated with the program with one or more of the attorneys on the faculty, as well as with the faculty council, and the teachers themselves to demonstrate a willingness on the part of the administration to accept teacher input in designing a non-threatening atmosphere.

Elson (1988), mentions observer leniency and says that faculty observers tend to evaluate the teaching of other faculty members favorably (p. 52). And some argue that no peer-coaching program can observe and evaluate instructors better than students who "observe" instructors on a regular basis. However, student evaluations tend to be summative and may not reflect methods, clarity, and purpose. In the staff development model found in the section of the paper on observation variations, it can be seen that student and administrative evaluations have their place

in the development process. And while teachers may be lenient, it must be kept in mind that instructors viewing other instructors represent individuals operating on the same plane. Over time the benefits of an instructor-controlled peer coaching process may be seen in improved student and administrative evaluations.

In any peer-coaching environment there are going to be mistakes made and feelings hurt. The mere accumulation of facts is not enough. We should guard against basing too much on any one observation or basing too much on even an entire year of observation. Administrators and instructors will have to accept the fact that there will be bombs and that success takes time.

One of the ways to avoid bombs is for pairs or groups of teachers to make agreements such as those suggested in the section on observation variations. It is necessary when making agreements to be careful that each individual involved understands what purpose the observer has in the observation. At Oklahoma Junior College, groups of three or four teachers seemed to work better than pairs. It may be that a small group working together allows for more free flow of information and for a more relaxed group. Each new agreement or understanding in beginning a program can lead to different or possibly deeper understandings in the future. As Hayakawa (1949) said, "With each new agreement, no matter how commonplace or obvious, the fear and suspicion of the stranger wears away, and the possibilities of friendship enlarges" (pp. 72-73). Much of the literature on peer coaching emphasizes the collegial bonds that form once a program is correctly set in place. Misunderstandings, however, or improperly coordinated observations, can lead in exactly the opposite direction.

It is necessary in building this type of program to understand that fear, frustration, and lack of understanding about what is to be accomplished will slow or halt the way. We have to be willing to accept bombs, to laugh at ourselves, and to try new directions. An administrative support-program consisting of meeting places for instructors, inservice material dealing with

peer coaching, and exposure to new teaching methods can help lessen the number and the impact of problem situations.

What the Administration Must be Willing to do to Support the Program

The administration must be willing to continue to place an emphasis on peer coaching through the following means:

1. Insure that coaching agreements are turned in.
2. Insure that administration does its own job by seeing to it that administrative and student evaluations are carried out in a timely and appropriate manner.
3. Insure that a continuing staff-development program for improving teaching skills, as well as peer-coaching subjects, is instituted.

Continued emphasis on improving teaching skills during inservices and peer coaching itself gives instructors new perspectives and provides new techniques for them to try during coaching sessions. An added benefit may be that teachers will learn more about subjects other than their own and about how differing disciplines may or should dovetail with each other. The administration cannot let its responsibilities fall by the wayside. As Manning (1988) pointed out, many good programs are initiated and then die through neglect. He said "constant reinforcement. . .is necessary" (p. 63).

The literature indicates that a peer-coaching program cannot survive without a companion staff-development program (Cohn, LeBlanc and Zide, Huddle, Witherspoon). Without such a program, Manning (1988) said it is like giving a final exam to a class [in this case instructors] before they even know what the subject is, and that we cannot expect teachers to improve in that type of environment (p. 2). The development of a program, including quarterly inservices, reminds instructors what is supposed to be going on: that peer coaching and the improvement of teaching skills are important and that through the staff-development pro-

gram instructors will be provided insights and ideas that may be helpful in setting up successful coaching sessions.

Two of the difficulties in developing a program such as this are for the administration to keep out of it and for instructors to realize that it is their program. The first violation of confidentiality between administrators and instructors, or among instructors, will damage or destroy almost any coaching program. The primary goal of the administration is to improve the quality of education in the institution, and as the administration is accountable for the improvement of teaching, it is very difficult for deans and presidents to accept the idea that peer coaching is not any of their business. It will also be difficult for instructors to accept that what happens in peer-coaching sessions is not be shared with the administration or other instructors. The administration would do well to emphasize its hands-off policy. Sometimes managers must be willing to sacrifice control in order to improve the overall efficiency of an organization, and peer coaching is an example of this. The administration must trust instructors to do their part, and the instructors have to be able to trust the administration to do its part.

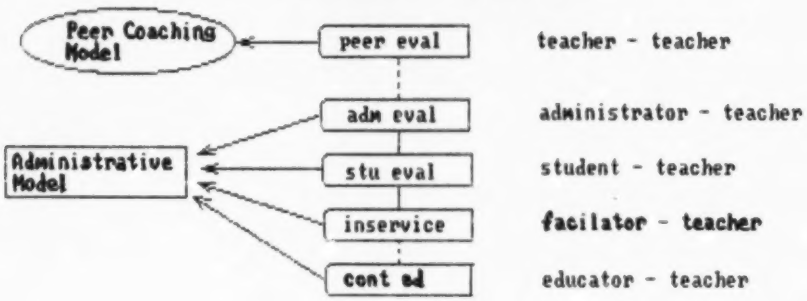
The models in this study are basically formative in nature. They should remain that way. Summative evaluations are part of another type of program, often involving appointed mentors, master teachers, and administrators. "The formative approach relies on the idea that each teacher is internally motivated towards excellence. A mixture of both summative and formative approaches within a single evaluation has rarely proven successful" (Lewis and Barber, 1985-86, Editors' Preface).

Observation Models and Their Descriptions

The Minor-Preston Staff-Development Program Model provides a picture of how administration is tied to the Minor-Preston Peer-Coaching Model. The Staff-Development Program Model shows how the administration and student evaluations, the inservice

meetings, and continuing education provide administration with a portal into the realm of peer coaching. This access provides administration the opportunity to view the final results of peer coaching based on their administrative observations and endeavors. The model describes the association between the faculty and the administration as it relates to peer coaching. The administration must provide the faculty with the tools necessary to insure the success of the coaching process. The administration must maintain its own dedication to the process by insuring timely and appropriate administrative and student evaluations. By also encouraging continuing education and conducting inservice activities, the administration can provide the support which will insure peer coaching is successful.

MINOR - PRESTON STAFF-DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM MODEL



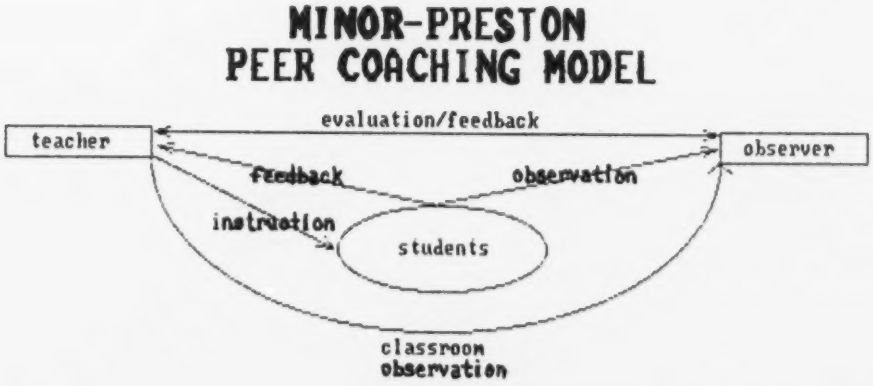
The Staff-Development Program Model begins with peer evaluation: this is a teacher-to-teacher relationship. This relationship consists of peer coaching between two or more teachers. The Peer-Coaching Model is linked to the Administrative Model by a dotted line indicating relative independence of peer coaching.

The Administrative Model involves all the elements that facilitate the peer-coaching process. The administration must continue its own evaluation of teachers: administration-to-teacher relationship. Student evaluations are still an excellent method of collecting additional data on how an instructor is

perceived by the student body: student-to-teacher association. Next, the inservice activity provides administration a vehicle to emphasize its continuing support of the peer-coaching process: facilitator-to-teacher alliance. The dotted line connecting continuing education to the model indicates that the educator-to-teacher relationship is an additional and independent means for teachers to enhance their skills.

The Minor-Preston Peer Coaching Model

The Minor-Preston Peer Coaching Model is the foundation for all the observation variations to be presented. The model uses the formative evaluation concept as the basis for the variations described.



This model demonstrates a means by which the teacher and the observer may scrutinize the same environment. The teacher instructs the students in the presence of the observer giving both individuals the opportunity to evaluate the student classroom population from slightly different perspectives. The instructor is allowed his normal interaction with the students and the observer bears witness to the teacher's performance, but as a learner. It is important to realize that whatever else is asked of the observer he is also a learner in the process. Once

the observation is completed, the individuals meets to discuss what transpired during the visit. Because the teacher and the observer are at the same level in the model, any discussion must be positive and supportive for the benefit of both the teacher and observer.

There are seven variations to this model. Our attempt is to provide a series of ideas that may fit the individual styles and needs of all instructors involved. Every teacher/observer combination opens a myriad of possible coaching techniques. In the following section, the base model is broken down into seven variations of the peer coaching activity. The variations of the model range from least threatening to moderately threatening. While we have attempted to form as non-threatening environments as possible, it is impossible to develop any meaningful experience that is completely non-threatening. The first step in getting an approved faculty-supportive program off the ground is to get them to try it.

Suggested Observation Variations

1. Non-Classroom Coaching: Non-classroom observations are those whereby instructors may (1) ask for a period during an inservice or department meeting to attempt a new method of instruction; or (2) use their "peer coaches" as "sounding boards" for an innovative or non-standard technique of instruction; or (3) request an audience from their academic departments to discuss a new direction of instruction. These are just three examples of non-classroom methods that may be employed in this type of observation. The primary advantages of this model are that the instructors are not threatened by the presence of the observer in the formal classroom environment, and that the psychological structure of a class-in-progress is not disrupted. This process will allow ambiguities and errors to be corrected prior to formal classroom presentations by the teacher and provides the observers with new instructional-process data.

2. Video Observation: The observer enters the classroom, sets up a video recorder, insures that it is functioning properly and then leaves the room. The observer returns after the class session is completed, turns off the recorder, and hands the video tape to the teacher. The teacher takes the tape and views it either privately or with the observer. This type of observation with its fixed focus reduces the benefits of viewing the full range of interaction with the students.
3. Goal-Free Observation (without feedback): In this goal-free observation the observer enters the classroom and observes the teacher as if the observer were a non-participating student. There is no predetermined objective or follow-up associated with this observation. This type of observation does not allow for the ever important feedback phase of the observation, but it does allow the observer to be a learner in the teaching process.
4. Single Input Process: This type of observation provides the observer with the opportunity to monitor a single teacher, synthesize the teaching method employed and reap the benefits associated with this type of relationship. The instructor and observer interact in a single feedback session and then switch to other partners. Eventually, all teachers have the opportunity to observe all others in a prescribed group. This process may be repeated within the same group or within a different group. The feedback or evaluation phase of this observation process occurs only at the option of the observed teacher and all feedback to this individual must be positive in nature. This method is a viable option for the instructor looking for just the right partner or just the right group.
5. Goal-Free Observation (with information exchange): In this goal-free observation the observer enters the classroom and observes the teacher as if the observer were a non-participating student. After the classroom teaching activity has been completed, the two individuals privately exchange information about what appears to have occurred during the class session. There are no predetermined goals for the observer to record, but this method allows for feedback.

6. Pre-determined Classroom Evaluation: In the pre-determined classroom evaluation the two individuals involved meet to determine exactly what will transpire during the observation. (Example: The teacher and the observer determine that the observer will track the sources of questions from the class members. This provides the instructor with a valuable data source with respect to the possible focus of the instructor's class lectures.) There are many different evaluation activities that can cccur during the observer's visit to the classroom. The observer functions as a research specialist and only gathers the type of data agreed upon prior to the visit and turns the data over to the instructor. This type of observation is extremely valuable if the teacher believes he has a classroom procedural problem. The evaluation function is maximized if there are well-defined, predetermined sets of observations to be made.
7. Continuing Formative Observation: A continuing formative-type observation uses a pre-arranged list of items to be observed, upon which comments must be made. Formative evaluations provide the teacher and the observer the opportunity to record the observation, make recommendations, and react to feedback obtained from this observation activity. This process depends on feedback which leads to additional pre-determined observations. It provides the instructor with the ability to constantly make teaching adjustments based on the information collected by the observer. The formative method allows for continuing growth and should never allow for the development of a "final evaluation." The formative evaluation described by this model provides for an ongoing decision-making growth process.

Observations and Recommendations

The administration mandated that all faculty members sign an approved Teacher Coaching Agreement at least three times a year. This agreement will be placed in the instructor's personnel file. The agreement states that the faculty member will participate in

one of the coaching activities recommended. The agreement has been reviewed by two full-time faculty members (both attorneys), the faculty council, and the teachers themselves, approving the wording and intent of this document. It should be noted that only the "observed" faculty member signs this form. This provides the academic dean with documentation that peer coaching is being addressed by that individual. This procedure was developed to protect the participants and does not provide administration with any information about the observer and the peer-coaching process.

There is a wide disparity concerning acceptance of the program among the various factions of the faculty at OJC. The most important concern has centered around a program chair member who has fought the concept since its conception in September of 1990; he said "I don't care what it is or what you call it, anytime you get the administration involved someone will be held accountable." Others who have given the concept a chance responded favorably. The faculty as a whole has concerns that the process could be used against the teacher. After long negotiations, the document has evolved into an acceptable form approved by the academic dean and the faculty. The peer coaching activity is the sole responsibility of the faculty members. They are responsible for protecting their interests.

One group of three members had difficulty allowing each other visitation rights into their classrooms because they fear disruption of the educational process. The members of this group interact well socially and have successfully engaged in peer coaching observation variation 1 (Non-Classroom Observation) on a frequent basis. This model allows them the opportunity to exchange ideas without the possibility of classroom conflicts. As a group they discuss their classroom environment and work to develop potential methods for improving their situations. This group has been approached by other faculty members who perceive benefits resulting within this group.

One program chair, who is a very dedicated instructor, is very excited about the whole peer-coaching concept. Her strong

support is felt throughout the college. She is avid in her position that all feedback be positive and that "nothing negative will be tolerated" with respect to peer coaching and the evaluation process. The group with which she participates visits classrooms and then meets to discuss what happened during the observations. The group forum states that the observer may not volunteer suggestions unless requested by the observed instructor. Peer coaching variation 5 [Goal-Free Observation (with information exchange)] is the observation technique used and is proving beneficial to this group. Prior to the visit, the students are told of the pending observation. The general statement used is, "There will be people visiting **our** classroom. I am participating in an activity that should improve my teaching skills and benefit you [the students]. These visitors should not be viewed as a threat to you or me as they are in our class to benefit all of us." This type of statement has proven very successful. The preliminary results indicate that the observer is not usually perceived as a disrupting foreign entity by the students or the teacher.

We recommend that instructors develop methods that work best for their particular situations. The primary underlying function of the peer-coaching enterprise is to improve the overall teacher effectiveness. The general attitude of most participating teachers is that peer coaching is not a threat to their autonomy.

Conclusion

Kneeland, a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma and an instructor at Oklahoma Junior College, gave this definition of a good teacher: "A good teacher is someone who teaches in a manner in which we learn." He also said that a bad teacher is often one who teaches in a way different from the way in which we learn. And finally he said, "We tend to teach in a manner that imitates those teachers we felt were the good ones, and therefore we teach in the way we learn."

The purpose of peer coaching is not to make everyone the same. The purpose of peer coaching is not to re-invent the wheel. It is also not to create a bureaucratic nightmare of mediocrity. The purpose of peer coaching is to help teachers discriminate between good teaching techniques and poor techniques, or to look for solutions to problems. It is a means to help teachers choose what may work well in their particular environments. According to Campbell (1988) the question to ask is not whether something is comforting or fostering, but "whether it is training up a character fit to live in this world as it is, or only in some Heaven or imagined social field" (p. 223).

If peer coaching serves any purposes other than improved teaching and academic freedom, it is better left undone. If it is to be used as a progressive tool to encourage correct thinking, it will result in a nightmare of bitterness that will scar our colleges in ways that Reconstruction scarred the South following the War Between the States and the Cultural Revolution scarred China. Peer Coaching is a tool for teachers and for teachers only, and while the administration can and should do everything in its power to encourage it, administrators must enforce a hands-off attitude and allow teachers to choose their own benefits for their efforts.

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